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Technology as Diversion

By Jamie McKenzie

([about author](#))

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The essential question:

When are new technologies worth using?

New electronic tools may bring productivity and enriched information to classrooms, but they can also promote diversionary activities that are unworthy of a serious teacher's limited time and attention, especially as schools gear up to confront the NCLB juggernaut. In many respects, the pressures on schools to "do technology" have very little to do with preparing students for the modern work place (despite frequent claims to the contrary). It is also doubtful that surfing the Net, creating flashy Powerpoint presentations or chatting on line with students across the ocean will enhance the thinking and learning capabilities of the young unless the technology-rich activities are shaped by rigorous

When ideology prevails
over truth . . .



"Corporate Head" ([credits](#) - [poem](#))

A new mind set?

In the past, we worried about
leaders with their heads in the sand.
In this century we note a new kind

design standards that keep the focus on reasoning and problem-solving skills.

If we allow students to slide into the seductive realm of cut-and-paste thinking enabled by the Internet, we actually undermine their capacity to meet the challenges of tough state curriculum standards and tests. We also leave them unequipped to wrestle with the daunting challenges of citizenship in a media-saturated world that offers up politics as entertainment with 130 candidates contending in the California recall. Imagine the Inspiration™ diagram required to compare and contrast the traits and track records of all 130 candidates! How tempting to "vote with your gut" rather than think analytically about the choice.

This kind of leader may obscure the truth of a dropout problem by allowing accounting systems to apply kinder labels to their departures. The appearance of improvement becomes the chief goal. Virtual change.

Educators find themselves buffeted by political pressures and intrusions that have little to do with helping students.

Virtual reform. Veneer. Rhetoric. Ideology. Propaganda. Misinformation. The Big Lie.

While our fundamental calling as teachers is the development of student capacities, we are mobbed by groups wishing to impose alien agendas, digital fantasies and marketing schemes on institutions that are already severely stressed.

It makes sense to use new technologies when they will do some good, but there is no justification for "doing technology" simply because it is fashionable or because industry leaders claim that digital and broadband visions are the future. Forecasts from WorldCom and Enron?

If schools fail to distinguish between foolish and smart uses of these tools, they will see little return on their technology investments.



A science teacher in Antelope Valley (CA) asks students to explore variables by "crunching" data with spreadsheets.

Smart technology use.



1. What is the population of South Africa?
2. What does it export?
3. What is the climate?
4. Who is its leader?

Photo of Durban, © 2003 J. McKenzie, all rights reserved.

In a different school in a different state, a handsome young teacher hands out a ditto sheet with a few dozen fact questions about foreign nations. The questions are just like the list at the end of a 1950s textbook chapter.

The room is filled with laptops. He sends students to a Web page that lists sites containing the answers. The middle schoolers dutifully gather the facts and fill in the blanks.

A 1950s lesson with new century equipment.

Inconsequential, trivial and diversionary technology use. Off target for improving performance on state tests.

Sticking to Our Knitting - In Search of Excellence, 2003?

In the early 1980s, a business book was all the rage in school leadership circles. **In Search of Excellence** by Tom Peters identified traits that set successful companies apart from the mediocre. This book arrived at about the same time as a sweeping indictment of American schools - "A Nation at Risk." Two decades ago, we were warned about educational disarmament.

A prime strategy advocated by Peters was "**Stick to your knitting!**" He reported that excellent companies were careful to avoid trendy distractions and were very good at focus. They knew what they did best, and they concentrated their efforts on improving performance. They were careful not to wander off task or dilute their performance. Our culture is filled with similar folk warnings. We are told to "**Keep our eye on the ball!**"

Within a few years, several of Peters' excellent companies folded. People's Express - a low fare airline - made a big splash but could not endure. Perhaps they did not stick to their knitting or maybe they stopped practicing some of Peters' other suggestions?

Peters' advice still seems apt for schools today, but outside pressures for change often make it difficult to focus our energies in ways that lead to lasting improvements. Many of those who concoct these change efforts have little notion of the tough, deep work required to turn around the performance of a single school, its teachers and its students.

Some schools that have already made startling improvements and have succeeded with disadvantaged students are suddenly being labelled as failures by the arbitrary and senseless provisions of NCLB. The law applies the failure label if subgroups do not improve their performance.

Then, as weak students transfer to supposedly effective schools, they will bring down their scores. Success can breed failure under such a bizarre system.

Florida leads the nation in showing the folly of such measures.

Florida Schools Fail To Meet New Federal Test Standards

MIAMI, 5:51 p.m. EDT August 8, 2003

MSNBC NEWS Reports . . .

The **Miami Herald** reported in Friday's editions that the data found only 13 percent of the state's schools demonstrated "adequately yearly progress," to meet No Child Left Behind standards. State education officials were scheduled to release the results Friday in Tallahassee.

<http://www.msnbc.com/local/WTWJ/A1733816.asp?cp1=1>

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States impose technology imperatives on schools via student technology standards, technology competency standards for teachers and technology tests for students. Districts must demonstrate that they are loading all teachers onto the technology bandwagon.

National educational organizations pile on the pressure with documents and products all pushing technologies upon teachers like some kind of religion. Their publications - jammed with ads - help vendors roll out "The Next Big Thing" in technology.

And yet we have no credible evidence that all of this technology sound and fury signifies anything worthy. The United Kingdom has conducted a huge study that failed to establish any convincing connections between ICT investments and student scores on national curriculum examinations. Note **FNO**, May 2003, "Focus on the Locus." <http://fno.org/may03/focus.html>.

Becta Report: Primary Schools - ICT and Standards at

http://www.becta.org.uk/news/reports/prim_ict_standards/html/intro.html

The summary page makes some weak claims . . .

"Schools with good ICT resources tended to have better achievement than schools with unsatisfactory ICT."

But a review of the actual data shows that most of this and other claims in the summary are based on the thinnest of correlations and very small margins. We are pushed by many organizations and institutions to infuse technology throughout the curriculum without having first established a very convincing case for its value.

No Technology for the Sake of Technology

It is time that schools stick to their knitting and stop doing technology for the sake of technology. It is time for state leaders and politicians to back down from the pressure to "do technology." Schools and teachers should be using new technologies only when they serve the primary mission of schools - teaching students to think, solve problems, make smart decisions, read with understanding, interpret information and communicate effectively.

We should stop measuring technology progress by the number of computers per classroom or the ratio of students to computers. We should stop assessing the quality of our technology usage by counting the number of teachers employing the tools or the number of classroom hours devoted to such activities. (Note the model suggested in the June issue of FNO,

"Assessing the Maine Laptop Program" at <http://fno.org/jun03/maine.html>.)

We should be looking at whether we are deepening and enriching student capacities. Counting is primarily an indication of market penetration, but the presence of equipment says nothing in itself about the quality or depth of student learning.

Putting Curriculum and Pedagogy First

Instead of putting the technology cart ahead of the program horse, we should start by asking which student capacities deserve our attention. We then seek best practices to develop those capacities. First comes pedagogy, then the choice of tools. We select those tools most likely to work, whether the technology be paper, questioning, handheld device or laptop.

Example #1 - Writing



If a school has identified patterns of weakness in student writing performance on state tests, for example, the staff asks which strategies for the teaching of writing will prove most likely to reverse those patterns.

Perhaps the school has already been using computers for student writing but has been waiting until the final draft is completed before allowing students to touch a keyboard. The school has successfully integrated technology into classroom life but has done so in a trivial, inconsequential manner that is unlikely to improve student writing performance. Here we have a perfect example of technology as diversion. Too little too late.

Fortunately, the principal and a planning team do a search for effective writing strategies and they begin to read of work by those who have devoted a lifetime to changing student performance in this domain. They collect the most promising strategies from a dozen thinkers (see Resources below) and combine them into a new school approach to improve writing by students.

They apply professional development money to a weekend retreat designed to equip all teachers with the skills for teaching "Writing as Process," and they plan several more weekends to show them how to apply the "Six Traits" approach ([see 6+1 Trait™ Writing](#)) as well as mind-mapping with a computer program ([Inspiration™](#)).

The group comes up with lesson plans that combine these approaches to writing with the use of computers. All teachers are given the message that these strategies must be applied to paper and pencil writing as well as laptop writing as long as the state still uses paper and pencil assessments.

Here we have an example of technology use that follows logically from sound curriculum thinking. In fact, paper and pencil has been a prized technology combination for decades - a technology that most state departments of education have been unable to relinquish at assessment time for a number of reasons such as cost and practicality.

Many professional writers who have fully embraced writing on computers will confess that paper still plays an important role in their creative efforts, whether it be Post-It Notes™, napkins or matchbook covers. Smart technology use concentrates on utility rather than mere fashion.

Example #2 - Reasoning



If a school notes weakness in student reasoning (analysis, interpretation, inference, evaluation and synthesis), the staff asks which strategies for the teaching of thinking will erase this deficit.

They look at the open response questions and document-based interpretation questions on the state social studies test and identify which are causing the most frustration and failure. Then they do a review of best practices much like the writing review mentioned earlier.

"From Trivial Pursuit to Essential Questions and Standards-Based Learning" at <http://www.fno.org/feb01/pl.html>

Once they have collected and synthesized the best strategies, they conduct the required professional development sessions and create model lessons. The school had been using networked computers for students to conduct research, but few of the teachers were asking students to think about the information. Their ditto sheets were filled with trivial pursuit questions such as the population or products of a country. Students were engaged in scavenger hunts. They were filling in the blanks. Lots of Internet research. No thinking required. Technology integration for inconsequential purposes. Technology as diversion.

The school outlaws topical research and mere scavenger hunts, emphasizes essential questions and requires that all students make answers rather than find them. Technologies are used to support thinking.

No More Technology as Diversion

Schools have serious work to do. Smart leaders will recognize the folly of technology as diversion and will concentrate resources where they will do the most good. They will use those technologies that make practical sense and they will support staff in learning how to use them most profitably.

Related Resources

["Writing the Right Way."](http://www.fno.org/jun03/writing.html) FNO, June, 2003. <http://www.fno.org/jun03/writing.html>

[Nancie Atwell "In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning"](#)

[Bakhtin, M. M. "The Dialogic Imagination"](#)

[Calkins, Lucy McCormick and Shelley Harwayne "The Writing Workshop : A World of Difference : A Guide for Staff Development"](#)

[Calkins, Lucy McCormick et al "Raising Lifelong Learners : A Parent's Guide"](#)

[Calkins, Lucy McCormick "The Art of Teaching Writing"](#)

[Elbow, Peter "Writing Without Teachers."](#)

[Elbow, Peter "Writing With Power : Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process"](#)

[Elbow, Peter "Embracing Contraries : Explorations in Learning and Teaching"](#)

[Flower, Linda "The Construction of Negotiated Meaning : A Social Cognitive](#)

Theory of Writing"

Flower, Linda (Editor), et al "Making Thinking Visible : Writing, Collaborative Planning, and Classroom Inquiry"

Flower, Linda "Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing"

Holdstein, Deborah H. (Editor), Cynthia L. Selfe (Editor) "Computers and Writing : Theory, Research, Practice"

Peck, Richard "Love and Death at the Mall; Teaching and Writing for the Literate Young"

Sullivan, Patricia (Editor), Jennie Dautermann (Editor); "Electronic Literacies in the Workplace : Technologies of Writing (Advances in Computers and Composition Studies)"

Sunflower, Cheryl "Really Writing! : Ready-To-Use Writing Process Activities for The Elementary Grades"

Sunstein, Bonnie S. , et al. "Composing a Culture : Inside a Summer Writing Program for High School Teachers"

Tucker, Shelley "Painting the Sky : Writing Poetry With Children"

Wilson, David E. "Attempting Change : Teachers Moving from Writing Project to Classroom Practice"

The "Corporate Head" installation is part of the "Poet's Walk" public art display at Ernst & Young Plaza (formerly Citicorp Plaza), located at 725 So. Figueroa in the heart of Downtown Los Angeles. "Corporate Head" is a collaboration between Terry Allen (artist) and Philip Levine (poet), Corporate Head. bronze, 1990.

Additional information may be found on:

<http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/la/pubart/Downtown/Poetswalk/>

Credits: The photographs were shot by Jamie McKenzie .

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